



NEWSLETTER
ISSUE 2
December
2020

MORAY BIRD CLUB

Welcome

Winter may have arrived, but birds still provide us with plenty of interest - there were even Swallows in Nairn in early December at the same time as Waxwings and Snow Buntings. In this second Club newsletter we have a range of articles on local birds and other wildlife, including a piece on one bird that will be spotted inside many homes on the 25th!

We held our first virtual meeting in November with a good turnout for talks on bird highlights of the year and Sandwich Terns at Findhorn. As the meeting was so successful another has been organised for January (see below for details).

We hope you enjoy this newsletter - we'd welcome any comments or suggestions for future articles. With best wishes from the Club Committee for a very happy Christmas and what will hopefully be a more normal New Year.

David Law

Chair



Forthcoming Events

On Wednesday, January 13 we are holding another virtual bird club meeting when Ben Darvill of the BTO will give a talk on *Unravelling the mysteries of the Cuckoo*.

We will provide more details nearer the time.

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Birdsinmorayandnairn.org is a one-stop-shop for everything to do with birds and birding in the region. View latest sightings, forthcoming survey work, bird club news and more.

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH...



Neil Sutherland & Carol Armour

Although we sometimes feel a bit restricted by not having a nearby coast to visit Carol and I have been fortunate to live in Cragganmore for the past nine years with a view of the River Spey from our living room window and the Speyside Way running in front of the house. Our regular walk is from Cragganmore to Blacksboat and we keep a good lookout for the birdlife in this part of the Spey valley.

Over the years we have had some excellent sightings of the more unusual birds of the area, especially between 2014 and 2016 when a Green Woodpecker made it as far north as Moray and was seen and heard on our usual walk. Other unusual records include the bizarre sight of a Gannet following the valley northwards and on two separate occasions a White-tailed Eagle causing consternation amongst the local corvids. Raptors are always exciting to watch and Goshawk is surprisingly slightly more often seen than Kestrel up here, with the recent addition of a pair of Red Kites being noticed with some regularity in recent months.

The river is a good locus for Common Sandpipers in season (they tend to nest in surprisingly open locations at times), as well as a plethora of Grey Wagtails and Dippers.



Grey Wagtail

Dipper

This summer, we observed a female Goosander with a creche of thirteen youngsters. In the winter Goldeneye are commonly seen and this summer we saw one or two birds frequently during the breeding season (as well as a couple of Teal which the local fishing bailiff thought were breeding). We started seeing Kingfishers occasionally a few

years ago and now have two spots where we think they have attempted to breed, although we have not found an active nest. There is also a small Sand Martin colony near Blacksboat but fluctuating river levels make it rather a precarious one. Surprisingly one or two Cormorants have made it this far up the river.



Record shot of Kingfisher

Teal

Summer birds include reliable Tree Pipits (although they seem to be decreasing), Spotted Flycatchers, Lesser Redpoll, Willow Warblers galore although very few Chiffchaffs, and in the pine plantations above Delnapot there are flocks of Crossbills. Ospreys are often noted along the Spey. In the past couple of years Tree Sparrows have begun to use nest boxes in front of the house.



Spotted Flycatcher

Breeding Tree Sparrow

Winter birds include at times large numbers of Fieldfares and Redwings feeding on the numerous rowan and bird cherry trees near to the river and Brambling coming to the garden feeders. This year however the rowan berries were stripped off the trees early on by large flocks of Blackbirds and Mistle Thrushes, so there have not been as many Fieldfares or Redwings as usual.

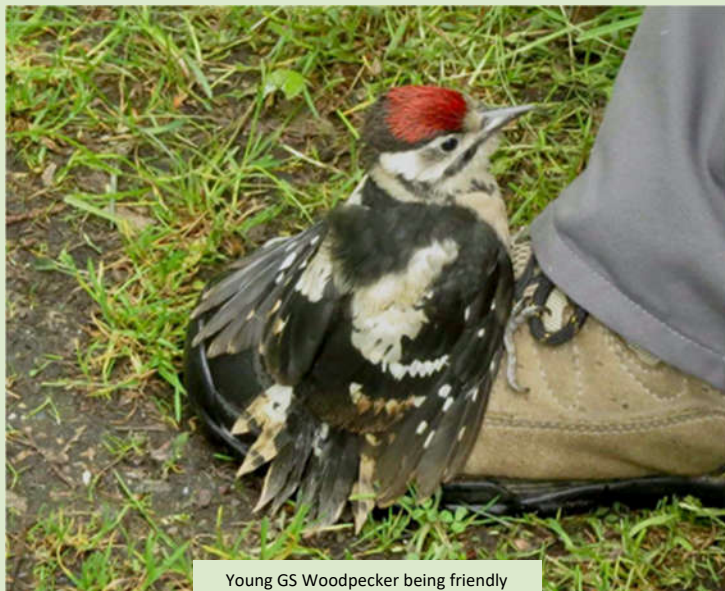


Brambling

Fieldfare

One of the most difficult birds to see anywhere in our experience is Long-eared Owl, having only glimpsed one once in Moray, so it was with great excitement that we watched an active roost of three youngsters being fed by their parents in the increasing gloom of a May evening this year a couple of miles from the house. (One of the parents was pursued by a Barn Owl at one point.)

Of course we keep an area list, which now extends to exactly 100 species, but we would have dearly liked to add to it this year when a neighbour called to say that he had a Nuthatch on his bird feeders (by the time we walked round it had fled never to return). We were also away on an overseas trip a few years ago when our next-door neighbours spotted Waxwings in the trees opposite the house.



Young GS Woodpecker being friendly

And any birds we would like to find in the area? Close by in Highland region we have seen, on single occasions, both Hawfinch and Great Grey Shrike and would love to see an accidental turning up on our doorstep. But more than this we would like to witness an end to the apparent decline of some of the less common summer visitors which used to frequent Cragganmore, such as Sedge Warblers, Whitethroats, Reed Buntings and Redstarts.



LATEST NEWS

SCOTTISH BIRDWATCHERS CONFERENCE

As you all know this year's Scottish Birdwatchers' Conference, which was due to be held in Elgin, had to be cancelled. Because of the continuing uncertainty next year's conference will be held virtually and the SOC will provide you with more details on that nearer the time.

However, we are pleased to announce that the Scottish Birdwatchers' Conference will eventually be held in Elgin on 19 March 2022.

BTO CONFERENCE

Some of you will probably have attended the virtual talks presented by the BTO at their conference at the beginning of this month. However, for those of you who missed these talks the BTO have put them online. If you search YouTube for 'BTO Conference 2020' you will find some interesting talks on Puffins, Waders, Garden Birds and Blackcaps among others.



AVAILABLE TO DOWNLOAD:

Where to Watch Birds in Scotland, SOC's free mobile app.

Where to Watch Birds in Scotland, the Club's free mobile app for Apple and Android devices, now has over 560 sites. The app launched in April 2019 and just a year later has been downloaded by more than 10,000 users. It won 'Product of the Year' in Birdwatch and BirdGuides' 2019 Birders' Choice Awards.



DOCUMENTING DORENELL – A RANGER'S WILD LIFE IN THE CABRACH

Mark Johnston



The male Dagger Fly, like a sci-fi nightmare with its huge eyes and long solid proboscis, hangs from a leaf. His free back legs cradle the female and simultaneously present her with a gift of a hoverfly. However, it is more of a loan than a gift as he keeps a firm grasp on it and once mating has been completed he flies off with it in search of another female and an opportunity to reuse the gift.

When I took on the role of Wildlife Ranger at Dorenell Wind Farm in June 2019 with a focus on Golden Eagle, Black Grouse and Red Deer I didn't think that a fly mating ritual would be one of the encounters I would be most excited about. Nor did I think when I moved into the Lower Cabrach that I would see a Red-footed Falcon, a Black Redstart, or the remains of a Kittiwake on moorland close to 30 miles from the coast!

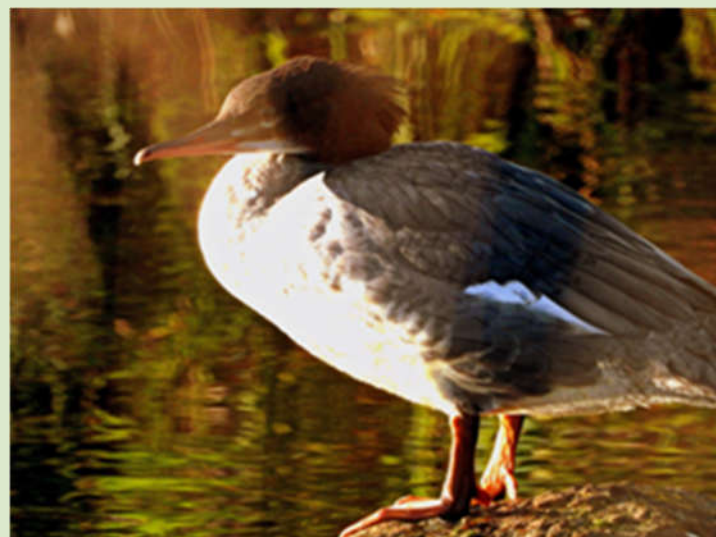
Dorenell Wind Farm is just off the A941 south of Dufftown. The area has a lot of natural history interest but has probably been under recorded. The Ranger Service is based at the new Visitor Centre next to the Grouse Inn. We sit at about 300m above sea level and are lucky to have a great view along the River Deveron, so what better place to start? This river is home to the heaviest UK fly-caught salmon - weighing in at a massive 61lbs it was taken in 1924 by Mrs Clementina 'Tiny' Morison.

Work from both the Deveron, Bogie and Isla Rivers Charitable Trust and the Spey Foundation has shown that the three rivers here, the Deveron, Blackwater and Fiddich hold important populations of Sea Trout and Atlantic



Salmon and a wonderful day out with the Spey Foundation saw us record 40+ redds on a stretch of the Fiddich with observations of the fish spawning. In addition water quality monitoring has shown these rivers are in good condition holding lots of macroinvertebrates that you would expect to find in healthy waters.

These provide a good diet for a range of other species and Dipper and Grey Wagtail both take advantage. While they use the river and its banks to find invertebrates,

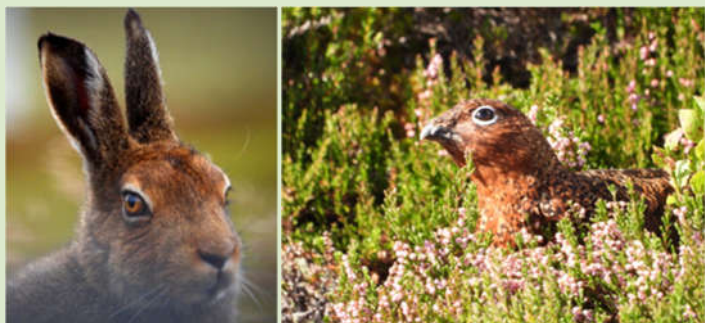


Goosander, Grey Heron and Osprey all visit to hunt fish. A pair of Goosander was present regularly in the early part of the year but with no sightings after March. Interestingly a single juvenile appeared in September for a few days. Single Osprey were sighted from the Visitor Centre throughout the summer but we are not aware of a nearby nest.

The area surrounding the river is made up of a mosaic of habitats, grazing land giving way to birch woods, gorse scrub and eventually heather moorland. This turns up woodland, grassland, moorland, and edge species that you would expect with a range of birds including Tree Sparrows taking advantage of the garden feeders. Swallows, House Martins and Jackdaws all use the buildings for nesting while crossbills have been seen removing mortar from the newly restored properties. And for a short amount of time on a May morning a Black Redstart investigated the garden area here – an unusual sight in Moray. Letting the dog out for the final time at night has turned up Barn Owl, Long-eared Owl and small numbers of bats.



Moving on to the higher ground, in summer Meadow Pipits become ubiquitous and they along with voles provide food for a range of predators. Sparrowhawk, Goshawk, Buzzard and Kestrel all have shown signs of breeding while Red Kite, Golden and White-tailed Eagle have all been recorded and as I mentioned before we even had a female Red-footed Falcon spend a day in early June. It spent time hunting insects from posts and by hovering but unfortunately the following day brought wild weather and it is assumed it moved on to find shelter. In April Kittiwake remains were found, it had clearly been taken by a bird of prey but how it got here we'll never know, whether it was crossing an inland area or perhaps a larger bird took it near the coast and carried it inland.



Also out on the hill a range of iconic species can be found, lekking Black Grouse along with Red Grouse, Hen Harrier, Merlin, Short-eared Owl, rutting Red Deer, Mountain Hare and even the very occasional Wild Boar!

This is just a snapshot of what I have observed and

recorded in my 18 months here. I haven't even mentioned waders, gulls, thrushes, reptiles and amphibians, butterflies or bees, or what we find in our moth trap. However, we started with an invertebrate so let's end with one too. The Red-breasted Carrion Beetle *Oiceoptoma thoracicum* was another exciting find with only 35 records in the North-East and none around the Cabrach. Excitedly I contacted NESBREC only for them to tell me it probably wasn't rare, it just frequents dung and carcasses and not many people poke around in those!



Oiceoptoma thoracicum



There are three car parks and trailheads in the Cabrach providing access to waymarked trails. The Dorenell Ranger Service Facebook page has more details on the trails.

For any information please email mark.johnston@edf-re.uk or phone the Ranger Office 01466 702251.

WHEN IS A REDPOLL NOT A REDPOLL?

Alastair Young

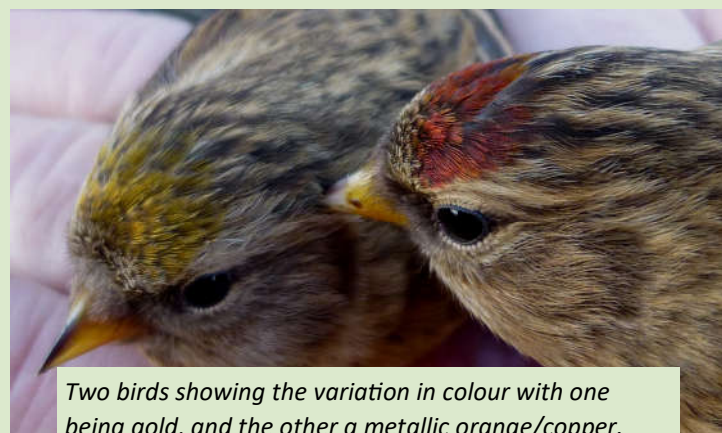
Many of you will be familiar with Lesser Redpolls, a small brown finch which breeds in Moray in small numbers and occurs in flocks in autumn and occasionally hangs about over the winter when food is plentiful. Although flocks are often relatively small, in good years they can get up to hundreds of birds and occasionally thousands.

The name is a straight lift from language with 'red' being from the colour on the head and the 'poll' being the front of the head. So you would think this bird was aptly named.



A juvenile male showing the classic red 'poll'.

However, this is not always correct and hidden away in the trees is a little secret; many Lesser Redpolls do not have a red poll. you can occasionally get no colour or a variety of brown through to red with a matt and iridescent metallic variation of the colours.



Two birds showing the variation in colour with one being gold, and the other a metallic orange/copper.

Many people think this is a result of what the birds are eating but monitoring of the colours suggest this is not the case. Over 2019 and 2020 a total of 729 birds were caught, and the head colour noted. The results are interesting and indicate that it is not as simple as what they eat.

The head colour was separated into 5 main groups with; no colour, Brown/Bronze, Yellow/Gold, Orange/Copper and Red/Crimson and the percentages of each type are shown in the table below.

All Birds	Total
None	0.69%
Brown/Bronze	15.64%
Yellow/Gold	2.33%
Orange/Copper	24.42%
Red/Crimson	56.93%

The birds with no colour were very young birds that had not completed the first post juvenile moult.



An adult male with an orange head.

While most birds are Red, there are almost 40% which are not. Why is this, well we can look at this in a bit more detail. If we look at adults and juveniles, we get this picture:

Total to age	Adults	Juveniles
None		1%
Brown/Bronze	7%	16%
Yellow/Gold	2%	1%
Orange/Copper	14%	20%
Red/Crimson	78%	62%

While there is some variation the overall picture looks similar, the main change being that more juveniles have brown colours than adults, and more adults have the orange/copper colour. Although not all birds can be sexed, we can also look at the different sexes identified which gives the following:

Sexed Birds	Males	Females
None		
Brown/Bronze		33%
Yellow/Gold		8%
Orange/Copper	5%	50%
Red/Crimson	95%	10%

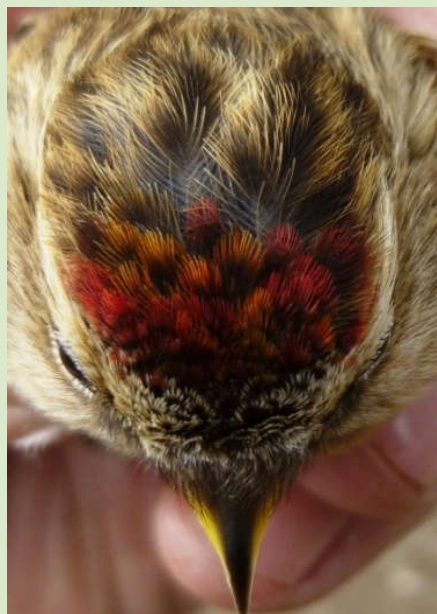
This shows a quite different picture with most males being red/crimson with the occasional orange/copper while females show much more variation. It also shows that no males had brown/or yellow colours.

So, what does all of this tell us. Two things come out initially:

- ◆ males are always either red or orange (in this case none were the copper colour)
- ◆ anything with, brown or yellow type colours are females.

The differences between sexes is unlikely to be only due to food unless they eat different foods during the moult which is unlikely

One of the difficulties with this species is that it is difficult to sex juveniles as some males do not get the red feathers on the chest until their second year. At least now this suggests that many more can be separated out to males and females



Never simple; some birds had two colours.

So next time you see a flock of Redpolls, if you get close enough have a look and see if you can spot something other than red.



LESSER AND COMMON REDPOLLS

While most of the redpolls we see in Moray are Lesser Redpolls, we do regularly get small numbers of Common Redpolls in winter from Europe amongst the flocks. Although very similar to Lesser Redpolls there are some differences you can look for.



Lesser Redpoll

Lesser Redpolls are overall a little smaller and have a warm brown colouration over the body, with brown showing on the wingbars, while the Common Redpoll is much paler and has an overall greyish look. The wingbars are also usually much paler in the Common Redpoll. You can see that grey look and pale wing bar clearly on these birds caught in Ordiequish near Fochabers.



Common Redpoll

Interestingly, of large numbers of Common Redpolls checked in Norway and from the 30-40 birds I have caught in Moray, they all have red or orange polls. Therefore, if you see any with brownish or yellowish polls then it's going to be a Lesser Redpoll.



Common Redpoll



SPARE A THOUGHT FOR THE TURKEY

Martin Cook

Even in the households of Moray & Nairn where birds receive little interest the chances are that one species will be a focus of attention over the next few weeks – the unfortunate turkey. Somewhere in excess of 10 million of these bulky relatives of the pheasant will contribute to our enjoyment of the festive season. But the white-plumaged and heavily meat-bearing bird that occupies the oven on Christmas morning is descended from an interesting ancestor that survives to this day – Wild Turkey of the USA and north Mexico.

Unlike its white domesticated descendants, the male Wild Turkey is largely iridescent brown and black with white barring on its flight feathers. The head and neck are bald and covered with loose, lumpy, wattled skin which is coloured pink or bluish.



A tuft of unusual bristly feathers, called a beard, grows from the chest of the male bird. The beard can grow to 30 cm long and, unlike other feathers, is never moulted. It grows continuously and its length is limited by wear as it trails along the ground.

The male Wild Turkey weighs 8-10 kg, twice the weight of the female – a disturbing prospect for the female at mating time! The male produces a ‘gobbling’ call which attracts a female from a distance. When she arrives, he seeks to impress her further by drooping his wings, also erecting and fanning his tail and most of the feathers on his back. The purpose of the ‘beard’ now becomes apparent – during mating he is unable to see the small female and he uses the dangling beard to guide himself into position.

Remarkably, it is suspected that Wild Turkeys, like their domestic descendants, can produce young from unfertilised eggs. All of these offspring are males.

The preferred habitat of Wild Turkeys is a mixture of mature woodland, shrubbery and grassland – to provide good feeding, cover from predators and trees for roosting.

Unsurprisingly, the early European colonists of North America hunted turkeys with enthusiasm and they were rapidly exterminated over large areas. No serious effort was made to restore populations until the 1950s when releases of captive bred birds began – but of 800 releases only three were successful in establishing wild populations. Much greater success was achieved from the 1970s by capturing wild birds in the few places where sizeable populations

survived and re-locating them to improved but unoccupied habitat. Since that time, numbers have grown dramatically and they are now thriving over much of their former range.

Hunting is now permitted once again in

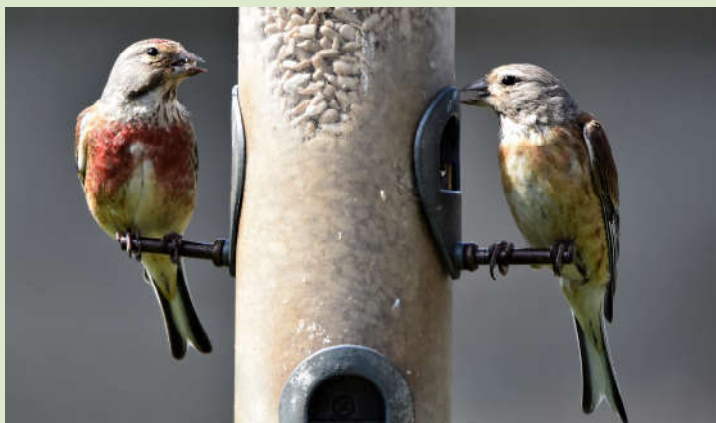
most areas and some populations have expanded into agricultural areas where they sometimes cause damage to crops. Recently they have even begun to inhabit suburban areas where their attention to bird feeders is less than welcome – and numbers cannot be controlled by hunting.

Wild Turkeys were originally domesticated in Mexico or the south-western USA, possibly as long as 2000 years ago. They were brought to Europe, initially to Spain, in the early 16th century and were well established in captivity in Great Britain by the 1540s. Since that time, selective breeding has resulted in the variety of forms of turkey available today.



GARDEN LINNETS OF BUCKPOOL

Sarah and David Law



Linnets are familiar small finches of farmland in Moray and Nairn, usually feeding on seeds of crops and agricultural weeds and breeding in scrub, particularly gorse. They aren't usually considered to be garden birds, so their regular use of a garden on the Moray coast for more than three years has been both fascinating and expensive!

Linnets were first seen in a garden in Buckpool in the summer of 2017, appearing on feeders filled with niger seed. They have been visiting the feeders on a daily basis ever since then. Typically, around fifteen Linnets will be present with a maximum of thirty-eight recorded in January 2019.



The Linnets usually arrive in a flock with Goldfinches, perching on clothes lines and phone wires while waiting for their turn on the feeders. They arrive just after dawn and are present off and on until dusk. There have been three and eight feeders, filled several times a day with niger or sunflower hearts, both of which they seem to enjoy. The Linnets usually share the feeders with Goldfinches, Greenfinches and House Sparrows, but are less assertive than any of these more aggressive species. The Linnets prefer using the feeders, but do occasionally feed on the ground and also drink from a bird bath. Although they can

be watched from around five metres, they are quite nervous and easily startled by sudden movements. They then retreat to the telephone lines until it is safe to return.

Although the garden is within the town, patches of gorse scrub suitable as breeding habitat are present within just 100 metres. Linnets feed their nestlings on seeds, but because they carry food in their gullets, it isn't possible to tell whether seed from the feeders is being used as food for young in the nest. Over the past three summers juvenile Linnets have accompanied adults to the feeders, suggesting this habit is being passed from generation to generation.

None of the Linnets seen have been ringed, so it isn't possible to identify individuals or be sure of the true total number of birds visiting. Well-marked bright red adult males are only seen very occasionally.

The Linnets use the feeders at times of the year when seeds are abundant in nearby farmland and unmanaged areas. They don't therefore seem to be using the feeders due to shortage of other food.

At least three Buckpool neighbours feed birds in nearby gardens, but none have ever seen Linnets on their feeders. Elsewhere in Moray, at a rural garden at Darkland, near Elgin, flocks of up to two hundred Linnets can be present in garden trees, but in twenty-one years they have never been seen on feeders. The RSPB Big Garden Bird Watch does include records of Linnets in gardens (not necessarily feeding), but they are one of the least frequently recorded species, seen less often in Scottish gardens than Ravens! A search on Google has turned up a few images and records of Linnets feeding in gardens but it doesn't seem to be a widespread or regular habit. We'd be very interested to hear if anyone else in Moray and Nairn has Linnets visiting their garden feeders. If so please contact our Branch Secretary moraysecretary@the-soc.org.uk



GOLDEN PLOVERS

Richard Somers Cocks

Golden Plovers, or *Pluvialis apricaria*, can be seen in Moray year round, but not always in the same areas. At the moment they are over-wintering on the coast and they are a common sight on Findhorn Bay. The best place to see them is just out from the bird hide where they can gather in groups of 100+ at low tide. At high tide they move off the bay to roost on the surrounding heathland in Findhorn dunes or on the airfield.



Golden Plover in winter plumage

At this time of year the Golden Plover are in winter plumage with pale underparts and typically golden above. Like many wader species their plumage changes in late winter as they develop their summer breeding colours. Both sexes show extensive black on the underpart of their bodies with the males showing a darkening of the neck and face. These changes start to show in February and by late March they will be departing for their breeding grounds inland on the hills and moors. A walk up Ben Rinnes in early summer will often be rewarded with a sighting of these birds near the top.

The Golden Plover we have breeding in Moray are from the southern breeding range of this species and are referred to as the race '*apricaria*'.



Golden Plover - southern race



Golden Plover - northern race

A northern race '*altifrons*' breed later in the sub-arctic tundra of Iceland, northern Scandinavia as well as arctic Russia. In spring - around mid-April - we sometimes see large groups of these migrating northwards and stopping off for a short while around Findhorn Bay. They are usually in breeding plumage by this stage and the males of this race are characterised by much more black on their faces and necks with the females resembling the males from race '*apricaria*'. In winter the plumages of these two races are indistinguishable.



American Golden Plover

As well as these European Golden Plovers, there are occasionally visitors to Britain from North American species - American Golden Plover and Pacific Golden Plover. Both these species are slightly smaller bodied and longer legged than our Golden Plover. If seen in flight their auxiliaries and inner underwing are grey unlike our Golden Plover which show much more white.

The American Golden Plover has never been seen recently on Findhorn Bay although it is a more frequent visitor to Britain than the Pacific. It does however regularly turn up on the west coast and when seen in comparison to a European Golden Plover it is a more greyish bird. They breed in North American arctic and sub-arctic tundra regions.



Pacific Golden Plover

Over the last couple of years we have been lucky to have seen 2 Pacific Golden Plovers turn up on Findhorn Bay. The first sighting was a bird in summer plumage that arrived in August 2018. More recently in mid October this year another one arrived in winter plumage mixed in with the other Golden Plover. They breed in the arctic tundra of Siberia and western Alaska, and would normally overwinter in the Pacific as far south as the coasts of Australia and New Zealand



Pacific Golden Plover and Golden Plovers



Picture Credits

Page 1 Robert Ince, Gordon Biggs

Page 2/3 Neil Sutherland & Carol Armour

Page 4/5 Mark Johnston

Page 6/7 Alastair Young

Page 8 Martin Cook

Page 9 Sarah & David Law

Page 10/11 Richard Somers Cocks & Al Kennedy (*American Golden Plover*)

NEXT NEWSLETTER



Hopefully you have enjoyed this newsletter. We would like to encourage our members to contribute to the newsletter.

We would also welcome any suggestions for future newsletters and we will try to accommodate them.

If you would like to contribute an article that may be of interest to our members or have any suggestions please contact:

Alison Ritchie

moraysecretary@the-soc.org.uk

BIRDS IN MORAY & NAIRN 2018 is now published and can be found under 'Bird Reports' – '2011 onwards', in:

birdsinnorayandnairn.org/

The report is only available on that website, from which it may be printed if desired.

